

Although community-based emergency response groups existed well before 9-11-01, the terrorist attacks roused citizens and re-energized the CERT concept.



CERTs across the USA

By David Wagman

To understand the effort behind getting a Community Emergency Response Team up and running, consider Mark Messens' job in Warren, Mich., a city of 140,000 near Detroit.

Messens oversees the city's CERT training program (with its goal of training and equipping 100 CERT volunteers over the next several months), coordinates the program's chain of command, acts as liaison between the CERT program and Warren's professional emergency response organizations, works to change misperceptions about the program both inside and outside those same organizations, and, so it would seem, seeks CERT program funding almost constantly.

He works with no official budget and mostly in his spare time. In addition to the 30 to 50 hours a week he devotes to CERT, Messens also serves as Warren's crime commissioner.

But that makes Messens' job as CERT

director not so very different from what professionals all around the country are doing to set up, deploy and maintain volunteer-based emergency response programs. The CERT concept, now officially supported by President Bush's Citizen Corps, is as long on enthusiasm as it is short on funding.

Life in the yellow zone

"The concept was to build a volunteer emergency force to be made available on an outcall basis to support our professional first-line responders," Messens says. Last April when Warren's mayor looked for someone to lead Michigan's first CERT program and forge a tool that would make residents more comfortable with the idea of responding to a possible terrorist attack, he tapped Messens.

"We're taking people from different walks of life and teaching them that walking in the 'white zone' is over," Messens says. The CERT training conveys the idea that civilians need to "live in the yellow zone." In that state of

heightened readiness, civilians observe and are aware of their surroundings and can act meaningfully in the event of a disaster.

More than merely teaching search-and-rescue and first-aid skills, CERT's strongest proponents see the concept as changing basic attitudes and expectations about disaster response.

"We're attempting to change cultures rather than train people," says Frank Lucier, an emergency management consultant and former member of San Francisco's fire department, who is credited with launching that city's Neighborhood Emergency Response Team in the mid-1980s. Now, as a national advocate for CERT and NERT programs, Lucier says Americans have come to expect emergency service personnel to respond immediately in the event of a disaster, whether natural or man-made.

But in a major disaster those services are frequently stretched thin, leaving first responders unavailable for hours or, in some instances, days. CERT train-



Jim Aldrich

In preparation for an exercise in April 2002, Neighborhood Emergency Response Team members in San Francisco line up for instructions in a middle school parking lot. The San Francisco Fire Department provided the instructors, and representatives from the police department, animal care and control, Red Cross, Salvation Army and other organizations assisted.

On the other hand, CERT has had to overcome initial resistance from some professional emergency responders. It also faces the challenge of uncertain funding.

As with other emergency response initiatives, CERT programs have both a pre- and a post-9-11 history. Before 9-11, most CERT programs operated in just two states, Florida and California. There they focused on teaching emergency response techniques to school and church groups and other private citizens, who could be called on in the event of a hurricane or earthquake.

For example, when Hurricane George threatened Cape Coral, Fla., in 1998, the city mobilized CERT volunteers to staff a telephone information hotline. Their efforts helped prevent the city's emergency 911 system from being overloaded. During the Florida wildfires in 2000, CERT members in Alachua County, Fla., fed firefighters and moved supplies. The program was first introduced in Florida during a 1995 disaster demonstration hosted at Universal Studios in Orlando.

During the 1994 Northridge, Calif., earthquake, more than 1,000 CERT volunteers responded. They performed more than 200 searches, made 17 rescues, provided medical care to 57 injured victims and transported 11 to hospitals, suppressed five fires and controlled more than 150 utility problems.

Since 9-11, CERT programs have added training related to terrorism, and interest in the initiative has grown. Not only is CERT a part of the Citizen Corps initiative, but in early November Los Angeles hosted the nation's first CERT conference, attracting nearly 200 attendees from across the country.

A cost-effective approach

Though CERT is more popular than ever, few cost-benefit studies exist to quantify the concept's effectiveness. One such study, done in the early '90s

by Rick Tobin, a California-based emergency management consultant, estimated that a CERT provides at least \$10 in savings for every \$1 invested. Sources interviewed for this article suggest that CERT training alone costs anywhere from \$100 to \$120 a person for a seven-week course. Thus, a community with 100 CERT volunteers could see a payback equal to as much as \$120,000 through its CERT training investment.

"For each individual and family you prepare, that is one less family to take care of in the event of a disaster," says Sam Isenberger, a training specialist and CERT program manager for FEMA's Emergency Management Institute.

"That's the whole premise, to be self sufficient," agrees Stacy Gerlich, a Los Angeles firefighter and paramedic who's also an instructor in LA's CERT program, the nation's oldest and largest with some 28,000 active volunteers.

The CERT program began in Los Angeles in 1985 as a U.S. adaptation of the kinds of community-based volunteer organizations that responded effectively when earthquakes struck Mexico City and Japan, overwhelming professional first-responders. [Ed.: See *"The Community Emergency Response Team: The real first responders,"* July/August.] Initially, CERT volunteers were trained in skills such as first aid and search and rescue. The idea was for citizen groups to be self-sufficient for up to 72 hours if professional emergency responders were unavailable.

After the October 1987 Whittier Narrows earthquake demonstrated the need to train civilians to prepare for earthquakes and other emergencies, the City of Los Angeles created the Disaster Preparedness Division within the city's fire department. Its objectives included educating and training the public and government sectors in disaster preparedness; researching, evaluating and disseminating disaster information; and developing, training and maintaining a CERT network. The Los Angeles program remains one of the nation's leading CERT efforts.

"People at the epicenter or impact area are the first responders," says Lucier. "In a major disaster, emergency services may be overwhelmed for a long time."

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington,

ing helps move people from being wholly dependent on emergency services to having basic life-saving skills that will have a "major impact in a disaster," he says.

Changing perceptions isn't easy, and at least two stumbling blocks exist. One is the popular media, which tend to reinforce the drama of helpless disaster victims waiting for rescuers. A second is the view held by some that professional emergency responders can handle anything. That may not be a bad outlook on a routine basis, Lucier says. But he knows from personal experience in the October 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake that even professional emergency responders sometimes need help.

A growing national movement

Warren's CERT is fairly typical of the programs spreading across the country. On one hand, the CERT concept is proving adaptable to local needs and conditions. From the initial focus on earthquake response, CERT programs have added training modules to address hurricane preparedness, hazmat response and even wild animal safety (some teams in Florida prepare for snakebites and alligator attacks).

D.C., drove that point home. In the days that followed, interest in volunteer defense and preparedness organizations grew. The Bush Administration responded by proposing a Citizen Corps network. Its purpose would be to prepare local communities to respond to the threats of terrorism, crime, or any kind of disaster. CERT was identified as one part of that proposed nationwide network.

Resistance from responders

But even a good idea like CERT can prove controversial.

Messens had to convince Warren's unionized public safety personnel that CERT volunteers would work in a support role only and not replace professionals as routine first responders. For example, CERT volunteers might be called on to stand guard near a fallen power line until a utility repair crew can respond. Having citizen volunteers handle such calls frees up fire and police



An Orlando (Fla.) Fire Department paramedic works with CERT volunteers on disaster medical techniques.

resources for more critical assignments, Messens says.

The natural skepticism shown in Warren isn't uncommon in communities that are deploying CERT volunteers.

"If my county has a volunteer fire department, I would probably view a CERT as a valuable additional resource," says Brian Morgan, a CERT specialist with the National Institute for Urban Search and Rescue. But in places with a strong tradition of maintaining a professional force, some people may attach less value to a CERT program, an attitude that can be counterproductive when a disaster occurs.

"People will naturally respond" regardless of whether they're trained, Morgan says. CERT works to make those people even more useful by teaching them appropriate skills applicable to a variety of scenarios.

City of Orlando

Missions and limitations

During the typical six- to seven-

week CERT training period, volunteers learn utility placement and shutoff skills, CPR, basic first aid, self-defense, firearms identification, incident command and traffic management.

What's more, CERT offers an organizational structure to help families, neighbors and whole communities respond in a more orderly and coordinated fashion. Warren's structure, for example, divides the city into four precincts, with one CERT team assigned to each. Each CERT team has a captain and a co-captain who live in the precinct and coordinate team members during an incident.

Warren's CERT volunteers are trained to respond to almost two dozen scenarios, ranging from a downed power line or a hazmat spill to WMD events. Regardless of the scenario, teams are dispatched only after the CERT director receives a 911 call from an emergency dispatcher. The director then calls the appropriate team captain or co-captain and orders the CERT team to respond.

Since the Warren CERT program graduated its first class of 20 volunteers



Members of the CERT in Salem, Ore., get a chance to practice their fire extinguisher skills.

last May, six deployments have been ordered. In one, Messens deployed the entire CERT corps to handle traffic control and staging for 1,700 law enforcement vehicles in a funeral procession for a slain police officer.

One change for CERT since the 9-11 attacks has been the addition of training to address how teams should

respond to terrorist acts. It's a sensitive area that contemplates a controlled, measured response by CERT volunteers.

"Any direct response by CERT members is not wanted," says FEMA's Isenberger. Responding to the immediate scene of a terrorist act is viewed as being "beyond their capabilities," he says, although CERT involvement away

CERT resources

A number of online resources offer additional information about Community Emergency Response Team programs.

- The Los Angeles CERT, the nation's oldest, maintains a Web site with links to both CERT programs in other states and current CERT training materials. The site is at <www.cert-la.com>.

- FEMA provides information on starting and maintaining a CERT through its Emergency Management Institute site at <<http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/CERT>>. The site has downloadable CERT training manuals in both English and Spanish and also provides a link to CERT training material related to terrorism.

- The consulting firm North American Emergency Management publishes an online newsletter, The Connection, that includes articles on a variety of CERT-related topics written by community emergency professionals from around the country. The newsletter's URL is <www.naem.com/connection.html>.

from the scene may be appropriate.

"There was a lot of thought given to involving them (CERT volunteers) in terrorism," says Lucier. The decision was that if the disaster was caused by a weapon of mass destruction, CERT volunteers "have no place there," he says. "These people are still volunteers" and should not be put in a situation where they're likely to be injured or killed.

The training materials put together by FEMA as part of its train-the-trainer effort are clear on several points: CERT members should not go into smoke-filled buildings, they should not go into buildings that are leaning, and if they suspect a weapon of mass destruction, they should "get out," Lucier says.

An endless fight for funding

As CERT volunteers increasingly take on a role in America's homeland defense structure, the issue of paying to train, maintain and equip teams becomes more important. Los Angeles' program may be the most financially stable, as its eight instructors are supported through the city's budget.

Elsewhere, though, funding is less

certain, at least for now. While Warren's CERT program enjoys city council support, it remains part of the police department. That status may change this spring, when the city council is expected to consider establishing the program as a stand-alone agency with its own line in the budget. Until more permanent funding is available, Messens has been tapping police department training and equipment budgets.

Federal funds have been available to state and local governments for CERT program development. During fiscal 2002, FEMA made \$17 million available to promote the startup of CERT programs or maintain existing ones. Money was channeled through the states, which were expected to make 75% of it available to local governments. Though passage of the homeland protection bill in November means some \$3.5 billion in a broad-based "first-responder" initiative may soon be available for CERT and other programs, that may be only a start in providing the kind of funding needed to expand CERT programs across the

country, as the Citizen Corps initiative envisions.

Local funding sources and volunteers themselves may need to assume responsibility for additional future funding, says Isenberger. "Many com-

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munities who saw this as a program they wanted to participate in (have) found a way to fund it."

That leaves CERT perched somewhat awkwardly with its roots in the realm of local initiative, but its future in a more terrorism-aware environment crowded with homeland security expectations. Local and state governments, recently strapped for funds, plead fiscal poverty when it comes to

paying for training. And as of late 2002, federal funds still weren't available for most CERT training activities.

The most important resource

Also challenging is the issue of mission creep, says NIUSR's Morgan, which results from CERT volunteers being asked to respond not only to basic fire and rescue emergencies, but also to WMD threats such as bioterrorism. Coordination becomes an even more important issue, and CERT advocates like Morgan are working to figure out how best to manage multiple teams deployed across a city, county or region.

That said, both Gerlich and Lucier report that there's been no loss of recruits or interest with the addition of terrorism training. Gerlich notes, in fact, that CERT training in LA is booked solid through next August. "People want everything they can get," she says. "People know it's part of the training."

Lucier adds that when the Citizen Corps Web site went up after 9-11, 60% of the people who registered through the site volunteered for CERT training.

He thinks the terrorism element has increased, not decreased, interest in CERT, and his experience with CERT programs tells him that people who volunteer for the training want to be proactive.

While a wide variety of reasons compel people to volunteer, Lucier says the two main ones are that people feel scared by the potential terrorist threat and that they "just want to help." At a minimum, CERT programs offer local governments a way to channel citizens' desire to "do something" to help secure the country after 9-11.

The program belays that "sense of helplessness" many Americans felt after 9-11, agrees Messens. CERT training helps develop confidence that ordinary citizens can "actually help in a crisis."

Rick Tobin, the consultant who did the CERT cost-benefit study, concurs: "If people think they can make a difference, they can act, even if they don't wear a blue uniform." **HPP**

David Wagman is a freelance writer in the Denver area.